

Thank you for a stunning evening

OK, I ADMIT it, I went to the Kennedy-King Scholarship Awards banquet out of sense of duty. John Armstrong, the editor of this paper and the man who approves my vacation requests, couldn't make it and he asked me to go on his behalf.

What better thing could I think to do on a Friday night than to go hear speeches at the Concord Holiday Inn?

Even though this scholarship program and dinner have been around for 34 years, I knew virtually nothing about either.

But it was coordinated in our shop by a woman who is one of my favorite department heads and, besides, John had asked me to go. (Did I mention he approves my vacation requests?) So just how bad could it be?

As I was to find out, that was the wrong way to phrase the question?

The real question is just how good could it be? I was stunned to find that, in fact, it was beyond good and rapidly approaching great.

The dinner has been held annually since that horrible year of 1968 when both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated.

The purpose of the Kennedy-King organization is to honor the memory of those slain leaders through college scholarships for deserving minority students who already have demonstrated academic ability in the state's community colleges.

These folks are going on to four-year institutions and need the financial help that this scholarship offers them.

This is not a government program dreamed up by Congress.



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Editorial page editor

It is a private endeavor funded by contributions. It has very low overhead, which means that nearly all of the donated money goes directly to the scholarships.

Unlike most award banquets, the keynote speaker was insightful, moving and concise. He made his points well and he sat down, which allowed each of the 20 students some microphone time. I know that 21 speeches in an evening sounds bad, but it isn't.

After the first three recipients spoke, I was so wrung out emotionally that I wasn't sure I could make it through 17 more. But I did. And, boy, was I glad.

Their stories, while vastly different, carried the common themes of struggle, sacrifice, hope and gratitude; both for the scholarship and our community colleges.

I have long shared their love for the community colleges, but that night I came to love the scholarship as well.

Some of the speakers were funny, some choked up, and nearly all were nervous. But they shouldn't have been, they were spellbinding.

One woman had been living in her car with her three children when she enrolled at Contra Costa College. She is about to graduate with an AA degree and is on her way to an excellent four-year college.

Another young woman was the daughter of a former

Kennedy-King winner. Her dad sat next to her beaming.

Then there was aspiring accountant who reminded us all that these scholarships are much more than financial. She told us that there was an accomplishment component to winning it that, for the first time, made her feel like she could do anything.

And there was the young man who told us he was about to be the first generation in his family to graduate from *any* college. His mother cried as he wished all of the mothers a happy Mother's Day.

The most moving for me was a young man whose parents had come here from Latin America penniless. But they worked hard and he was able to go to school. He did well in high school until he was struck with a near fatal disease. Family and strong will had pulled him through.

He told of going on a trip to a country in Central America and seeing abysmal medical conditions there. He choked back tears as he said, "We have so much here, and they have so little." Then he told the audience that they had made a good choice in him because he is not only going to finish college, but is going on to medical school so he can help poor people.

Each student spoke of "giving something back," once they finish school. I have no doubt that they will.

If you get tired of bad news and need to see that there are plenty of things right in this world, just attend the Kennedy-King annual banquet next year. I will see you there.

Hatfield is editorial page editor for Contra Costa Newspapers.